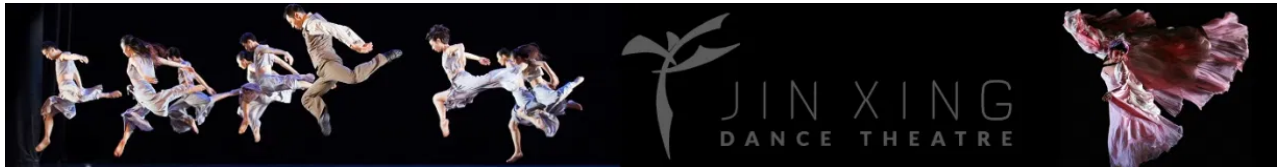


Old Europe Is (Not) Dying: Literature, Tradition and Politics in Tiago Rodrigues' *Sopro* (and Other Performances)

critical-stages.org/17/old-europe-is-not-dying-literature-tradition-and-politics-in-tiago-rodrigues-sopro-and-other-performances/

May 16, 2018



Rui Pina Coelho*

***Sopro*, written and directed by Tiago Rodrigues. Premiered at Festival d'Avignon, Cloître des Carmes, in July 2017; next run at the National Theatre D. Maria II, Lisbon, in November 2017.**

Tiago Rodrigues' theatre has always been traversed by literature. It has always flirted with great novels, literary tradition and bookish erudition. Even in his early works, it is relatively easy to find a respectful (yet fresh) approach to Borges' labyrinths, to Auster's poetics of coincidence or to Eco's constellations. In *Yesterday's Man* (2007), one of his earliest works, devised in collaboration with Lebanese artists Rahib Mroué and Tony Chakar, Rodrigues created an intricate, multileveled narrative, where he, sitting at a table and sipping tea, told the story of a journey to Beirut, projecting photographs and maps as a tired traveller would do. The story told, however, rapidly entered a complex exercise of meta-reflexivity, where the narrator finds another "Tiago Rodrigues," who is chasing yet another "Tiago Rodrigues," all from different epochs. And, suddenly, what seemed to be a bright exercise of storytelling opened up into a revealing display of the written text's performativity. The inventive idea of performativity and text, managed by this delicate, simple and subtle performance, was never completely abandoned in Rodrigues' later works.

Born in 1977, Rodrigues co-directed, with Magda Bizarro, from 2003 to December 2014, the Mundo Perfeito theatre company. Trained as an actor in Lisbon, Rodrigues soon became close to those who were reinventing the theatrical fabric, either in Portugal, such as the decentred practice of Jorge Silva Melo with Artistas Unidos, or in Europe, such as Tg Stan, a highly influential Belgian troupe within Portuguese theatre in the late nineties/early noughts, with whom Rodrigues has co-created and performed several times. Since the end of 2014, Tiago Rodrigues has been the (youngest ever) Artistic Director of the prestigious National Theatre D. Maria II.



The Way She Dies, by Tiago Rodrigues, Prod. tg STAN and National Theatre D. Maria II, 2017 (Isabel Abreu). Photo: Filipe Ferreira

From an actor who wrote and often directed his own texts, Rodrigues quickly began to establish himself also as an author and director—an *écrivain de plateau*—increasingly cutting down on his appearances as a performer.

Within the Portuguese theatrical context, Rodrigues is one of the most prominent examples of the path Portuguese theatre has taken since the late nineties: a theatrical landscape determined by a libertarian flame and collaborative processes.

If we look at some of Tiago Rodrigues' more mature works, such as *Se uma Janela se abrisse* (2010) [*If a Window Would Open*], *Tristeza e Alegria na Vida das Girafas* (2011) [*Sadness and Joy in the Life of Giraffes*], *Três dedos abaixo do Joelho* (2012) [*Three Fingers below the Knee*], *Entrelinhas* (2013) [*In Between the Lines*] or *António e Cleópatra* (2014) [*Antony and Cleopatra*], we can perceive that the elaboration of, and reflection on, language, discourse and literature are his major artistic features.



The Way She Dies, by Tiago Rodrigues, Prod. tg STAN and National Theatre D. Maria II, 2017 (Jolente De Keersmaecker and Pedro Gil). Photo: Filipe Ferreira

If a Window Would Open dealt precisely with the vanishing of language while facing the violent transformations in the world, as five actors doubled what seemed to be a television news programme with one of Portugal's most famous anchors. *Sadness and Joy in the Life of Giraffes*, his first full length play, presents the crude reality of the difficult austerity years in Portugal, with a story of a nine-year-old girl who travels through Lisbon to find the money required to keep up her Discovery Channel subscription, on a journey reminiscent of other fantastic adventures, such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Alice in Wonderland* or Maeterlinck's *Blue Bird*. *Three Fingers below the Knee* is a farcical parody of censorship within the performing arts, constructed exclusively with the notes and comments written by the theatre censors operating during Salazar's fascist regime. *In Between the Lines* creates a meta-fictional narrative with a copy of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* as its starting point, and a letter that is written between its lines. *Antony and Cleopatra* is a free re-creation of Shakespeare's tragedy, built for the delicate bodies of two superlative dancers (Vitor Roriz and Sofia Dias) in an elliptical and minimal performance. Thus, all these creations seem to reveal a strong desire to deal with language, literature and discourse—and, particularly, with its vanishing, disappearance and apparent loss of importance.



Sopro, by Tiago Rodrigues. Prod. National Theatre D. Maria II, 2017 (Cristina Vidal and Isabel Abreu
Photo by Christophe Raynaud de Lage). Photo: Christophe Raynaud de Lage

This concern is more clearly perceivable in some of Tiago Rodrigues more recent performances, where the literary tradition (particularly the European one) is more evidently invoked. *Bovary* revives the trial of Gustave Flaubert after the publication of his infamous novel, *Madame Bovary*, in 1857, discussing art, love and justice; and *The Way She Dies* (co-produced with Tg Stan) is a reification of Tolstoy's classic, *Anna Karenina*, through the anatomy of the effect it has on the lives of two couples (also triangles), readers of Tolstoy, in the present day and in the libertarian sixties.

And, of course, *By Heart*, a solo performance played by Rodrigues himself (touring around the globe), where he helps ten members of the audience to learn “by heart” Shakespeare's sonnet number 30—“When to the sessions of sweet silent thought”—in a magical poetical journey intermingling his grandmother's stories with Boris Pasternak's, Osip Mandelstam's, George Steiner's and Ray Bradbury's. While helping ten of the spectators, who join him on stage, to memorize Shakespeare's sonnet, Rodrigues recalls plots and narratives that emphasize the struggle to remember and the will to hold on to the great achievements humanity has created, such as literature.

The point of this unique performance is quite clear: as soon as we memorize something beautiful by heart, there will be no austerity, no authority, no police strong enough to take that piece of culture, that piece of humanity, away from us.

Thus, this performance, notwithstanding all its intelligence, wit and irreprehensible dramaturgical craftsmanship, is ultimately a strong and powerful statement on the praise of European cultural heritage. Its preservation is seen here as an act of impenitent

political resistance.



Sopro, by Tiago Rodrigues. Prod. National Theatre D. Maria II, 2017 (Sofia Dias, Isabel Abreu, Beatriz Brás, Cristina Vidal and Vítor Roriz). Photo: Christophe Raynaud de Lage

With *Sopro* (2017), I believe we are under the same scope. This performance is a marvellous homage to theatre and its practitioners. Thus, *Sopro* places on stage a professional prompter, one of the last still active in Portugal, Cristina Vidal. The collapse between fiction and reality (another constant feature of Rodrigues' dramaturgy) is evident here. Facts and events from Cristina Vidal's own life are mixed and manipulated by Rodrigues, who blends them with the plots of several plays and with Portuguese theatre history. Hence, the performance has three diegetic lines: firstly, we hear the story of how "the director of [Cristina's] theatre" convinces her to play the role of herself in the performance; secondly, there is Cristina's tale of her forty years as a prompter, recalling the first day she arrived at the theatre and several other (dramatic) episodes; finally, there is also the story of the former Cristina's Directress—her sickness, life and loves. Through it all, there are several scenes inherited from Chekhov, Antonio Patrício and Molière, amongst other references to landmarks of European drama. An impressive palimpsestic exercise, full of poignant joy and nostalgia for "a" theatre that seems to be disappearing.

And this is precisely what strikes me the most: this performance rises as a nostalgic yet resilient act of resistance to the alleged disappearance of European cultural heritage. The homage to Cristina Vidal's career and life is also an homage to all prompters. And metonymically, to all the professions that are disappearing, to "old" theatre, to a culture that is disappearing. Hence, it is a gesture of political resistance through art and memory against the disappearance of Europe.

In a post-Brexit landscape, at a time when (Old) Europe seems to be crumbling and many former European ghosts seem to be returning, such as intolerance, racism and fascism, to recall and honour the vitality and examples of Shakespeare, Molière, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Steiner and others is no mere coincidence. It is a vital and urgent political act. We still need the words, characters and lessons that these authors bring. And Tiago Rodrigues' theatre is here to remind us that if we cherish this heritage, if we revive it, if we memorize it, there will be no menace strong enough to bring it down.

***Rui Pina Coelho** (Évora, 1975) is Assistant Professor at the School of Arts and Humanities (University of Lisbon) and a researcher at the Centre for Theatre Studies (Lisbon). He has a PhD in Theatre Studies with a study on the representation of violence in Post-World War II British Realist Drama. As an author, playwright and translator, he has worked with several Portuguese theatre companies. Since 2010, he has been collaborating with TEP-Experimental Theatre of Oporto, as a playwright and dramaturg. He is also a member of the Direction of APCT (Portuguese Association of Theatre Critics) and Director of *Sinais de cena-Theatre and Performing Arts Journal*. He is the author of, among other titles, *A hora do crime: A violência na dramaturgia britânica do pós-Segunda Guerra Mundial (1951-1967)* (Peter Lang, 2016), *Casa da Comédia (1946-1975): Um palco para uma ideia de teatro* (IN-CM, 2009). He recently coordinated the volume *Contemporary Portuguese Theatre: Experimentalism, Politics and Utopia [Working Title]* (TNDMII/Bicho do Mato, 2017).

